Imam Husain And His Martyrdom

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Preface

The following pages are based on a report of an Address which I delivered in London at an Ashura Majlis on Thursday the 28th May, 1931 (Muharram 1350 A.H.), at the Waldorf Hotel. The report was subsequently corrected and slightly expanded. The Majlis was a notable gathering, which met at the invitation of Mr. A. S. M. Anik. Nawab Sir Umar Hayat Khan, Tiwana, presided and members of all schools of thought in Islam, as well as non-Muslims, joined reverently in doing honor to the memory of the great Martyr of Islam. By its inclusion in the Progressive Islam Pamphlets series, it is hoped to reach a larger public than were able to be present in person. Perhaps, also, it may help to strengthen the bonds of brotherly love which unite all who hold sacred the ideals of brotherhood preached by the Prophet in his last Sermon.

A. Yusuf Ali.

Imam Husain And His Martyrdom

Sorrow as a Bond of Union

I am going to talk this afternoon about a very solemn subject, the martyrdom of Imam Husain at Kerbela, of which we are celebrating the anniversary. As the Chairman has very rightly pointed out, it is one of those wonderful events in our religious history about which all sects are agreed. More than that, in this room I have the honor of addressing some people who do not belong to our religious persuasion, but I venture to think that the view I put forward today may be of interest to them from its historical, its moral and its spiritual significance. Indeed, when we consider the background of that great tragedy, and all that has happened during the 1289 lunar years since, we cannot fail to be convinced that some events of sorrow and apparent defeat are really the very things which are calculated to bring about, or lead us towards, the union of humanity.

How Martyrdom healed divisions

When we invite strangers or guests and make them free of our family circle that means the greatest out flowing of our hearts to them. The events that I am going to describe refer to some of the most touching incidents of our domestic history in their spiritual aspect. We ask our brethren of other faiths to come, and share with us some of the thoughts, which are called forth by this event. As a matter of fact all students of history are aware that the horrors that are connected with the great event of Kerbela did more than anything else to unite together the various contending factions which had unfortunately appeared at that early stage of Muslim history. You know the old Persian saying applied to the Prophet:

> *Tu barae wasl kardan amadi;*
> *Ni barae fasl kardan amadi.*
> "Thou camest to the world to unite, not to divide."

That was wonderfully exemplified by the sorrows and sufferings and finally the martyrdom of Imam Husain.

Commemoration of great virtues

There has been in our history a tendency sometimes to celebrate the event merely by wailing and tribulation, or sometimes by symbols like the *Tazias* that you see in India, - *Taboots* as some people call them. Well, symbolism or visible emblems may sometimes be useful in certain circumstances as tending to crystallise ideas. But I think the Muslims of India of the present day are quite ready to adopt a more effective way of celebrating the martyrdom, and that is by contemplating the great virtues of the martyr, trying to understand the significance of the events in which he took part, and translating those great moral and spiritual lessons into their own lives.

From that point of view I think you will agree that it is good that we should sit together, even people of different faiths, - sit together and consider the great historic event, in which were exemplified such soul-stirring virtues as those of unshaken faith, undaunted courage, thought for others, willing self-sacrifice, steadfastness in the right and unflinching war against the wrong. Islam has a history of beautiful domestic affections, of sufferings and of spiritual endeavour, second to none in the world. That side of Muslim history, although to me the most precious, is, I am sorry to say, often neglected. It is most important that we should call attention to it, reiterated attention, the attention of our own people as well as the attention of those who are interested in historical and religious truth. If there is anything precious in Islamic history it is not the wars, or the politics, or the brilliant expansion, or the glorious conquests, or even the intellectual spoils which our ancestors gathered. In these matters, our history, like all history, has its lights and shades. What we need especially to emphasise is the spirit of organisation, of brotherhood, of undaunted courage in moral and spiritual life.

Plan of discourse

I propose first to give you an idea of the geographical setting and the historical background. Then I want very briefly to refer to the actual events that happened in the Muharram, and finally to draw your attention to the great lessons which we can learn from them.

Geographical Picture

In placing before you a geographical picture of the tract of country in which the great tragedy was enacted, I consider myself fortunate in having my own personal memories to draw upon. They make the picture vivid to my mind, and they may help you also. When I visited those scenes in 1928, I remember going down from Baghdad through all that country watered by the Euphrates river. As I crossed the river by a bridge of boats at Al-Musaiyib on a fine April morning, my thoughts leapt over centuries and centuries. To the left of the main river you have the old classic ground of Babylonian history; you have the railway station of Hilla; you have the ruins of the city of Babylon, witnessing to one of the greatest civilizations of antiquity. It was so mingled with the dust that it is only in recent years that we have begun to understand its magnitude and magnificence. Then you have the great river system of the Euphrates, the *Furat* as it is called, a river unlike any other river we know. It takes its rise in many sources from the mountains of Eastern Armenia, and sweeping in great zigzags through rocky country, it finally skirts the desert as we see it now. Wherever it or its interlacing branches or canals can reach, it has converted the desert into fruitful cultivated country; in the picturesque phrase, it has made the desert blossom as the rose. It skirts round the Eastern edge of the Syrian desert and then flows into marshy land. In a tract not far from Kerbela itself there are lakes which receive its waters, and act as reservoirs. Lower down it unites with the other river, the Tigris, and the united rivers flow in the name of the *Shatt-al-Arab* into the Persian Gulf.

Abundant water & tragedy of thirst

From the most ancient times this tract of the lower Euphrates has been a garden. It was a cradle of early civilization, a meeting place between Sumer and Arab, and later between the Persians and Arabs. It is a rich, well-watered country, with date palms and pomegranate groves. Its fruitful fields can feed populous cities and its luscious pastures attract the nomad Arabs of the desert, with their great flocks and herds. It is of particularly tragic significance that on the border of such a well-watered land, should have been enacted the tragedy of great and good men dying of thirst and slaughtered because they refused to bend the knee to the forces of iniquity. The English poet's lines "Water, water everywhere, and not a drop to drink" are brought home forcibly to you in this borderland between abundant water and desolate sands.

Kerbela and Its Great Dome

I remember the emotion with which I approached Kerbela from the East. The rays of the morning sun gilt the *Gumbaz-i-Faiz*, the great dome that crowns the building containing the tomb of Imam Husain. Kerbela actually stands on one of the great caravan routes of the desert. Today the river city of Kufa, once a Khilafat capital, is a mere village, and the city of Najaf is famous for the tomb of Hazrat Ali, but of little commercial importance. Kerbela, this outpost of the desert, is a mart and a meeting ground as well as a sacred place. It is the port of the desert, just as Basra, lower down, is a port for the Persian Gulf. Beautifully kept is the road to the mausoleum, to which all through the year come pilgrims from all parts of the world. Beautiful colored enameled tiles decorate the building. Inside, in the ceiling and upper walls, there is a great deal of glass mosaic. The glass seems to catch and reflect the light. The effect is that of rich coruscations of light combined with the solemnity of a closed building. The tomb itself is in a sort of inner grill, and below the ground is a sort of cave, where is shown the actual place where the Martyr fell. The city of Najaf is just about 40 miles to the South, with the tomb of Hazrat Ali on the high ground. You can see the golden dome for miles around. Just four miles from Najaf and connected with it by a tramway, is the deserted city of Kufa. The mosque is large, but bare and practically unused. The blue dome and the *Mihrab* of enameled tiles bear witness to the ancient glory of the place.

Cities and their Cultural Meaning

The building of Kufa and Basra, the two great outposts of the Muslim Empire, in the 16th year of the Hijra, was a visible symbol that Islam was pushing its strength and building up a new civilisation, not only in a military sense, but in moral and social ideas and in the sciences and arts. The old effete cities did not content it, any more than the old and effete systems, which it displaced. Nor was it content with the first steps it took. It was always examining, testing, discarding, re-fashioning its own handiwork. There was always a party that wanted to stand on old ways, to take cities like Damascus readymade, that loved ease and the path of least resistance. But the

greater souls stretched out to new frontiers - of ideas as well as geography. They felt that old seats were like dead wood breeding worms and rottenness that were a danger to higher forms of life. The clash between them was part of the tragedy of Kerbela. Behind the building of new cities there is often the burgeoning of new ideas. Let us therefore examine the matter a little more closely. It will reveal the hidden springs of some very interesting history.

Vicissitudes of Mecca and Medina

The great cities of Islam at its birth were Mecca and Medina. Mecca, the center of old Arabian pilgrimage, the birthplace of the Prophet, rejected the Prophet's teaching, and cast him off. Its idolatry was effete; its tribal exclusiveness was effete; its ferocity against the Teacher of the New Light was effete. The Prophet shook its dust off his feet, and went to Medina. It was the well-watered city of Yathrib, with a considerable Jewish population. It received with eagerness the teaching of the Prophet; it gave asylum to him and his Companions and Helpers. He reconstituted it and it became the new City of Light. Mecca, with its old gods and its old superstitions, tried to subdue this new Light and destroy it. The human odds were in favour of Mecca. But God's purpose upheld the Light, and subdued the old Mecca. But the Prophet came to build as well as to destroy. He destroyed the old paganism, and lighted a new beacon in Mecca - the beacon of Arab unity and human brotherhood. When the Prophet's life ended on this earth, his spirit remained. It inspired his people and led them from victory to victory. Where moral or spiritual and material victories go hand in hand, the spirit of man advances all along the line. But sometimes there is a material victory, with a spiritual fall, and sometimes there is a spiritual victory with a material fall, and then we have tragedy.

Spirit of Damascus

Islam's first extension was towards Syria, where the power was centered in the city of Damascus. Among living cities it is probably the oldest city in the world. Its bazaars are thronged with men of all nations, and the luxuries of all nations find ready welcome there. If you come to it westward from the Syrian Desert, as I did, the contrast is complete, both in the country and in the people. From the parched desert sands you come to fountains and vineyards, orchards and the hum of traffic. From the simple, sturdy, independent, frank Arab, you come to the soft, luxurious, sophisticated Syrian. That contrast was forced on the Muslims when Damascus became a Muslim city. They were in a different moral and spiritual atmosphere. Some succumbed to the softening influences of ambition, luxury, wealth pride of race, love of ease, and so on. Islam stood always as the champion of the great rugged moral virtues. It wanted no compromise with evil in any shape or form, with luxury, with idleness, with the seductions of this world. It was a protest against these things. And yet the representatives of that protest got softened at Damascus. They aped the decadent princes of the world instead of striving to be leaders of spiritual thought.

Discipline was relaxed, and governors aspired to be greater than the Khalifas. This bore bitter fruit later.

Snare of Riches

Meanwhile Persia came within the Muslim orbit. When Medain was captured in the year 16 of the Hijra, and the battle of Jalula broke the Persian resistance, some military booty was brought to Medina - gems, pearls, rubies, diamonds, swords of gold and silver. A great celebration was held in honor of the splendid victory and the valour of the Arab army. In the midst of the celebration they found the Caliph of the day actually weeping. One said to him, "What! a time of joy and thou sheddest tears?" "Yes", he said, "I foresee that the riches will become a snare, a spring of worldliness and envy, and in the end a calamity to my people." For the Arab valued, above all, simplicity of life, openness of character, and bravery in face of danger. Their women fought with them and shared their dangers. They were not caged creatures for the pleasures of the senses. They showed their mettle in the early fighting round the head of the Persian Gulf. When the Muslims were hard pressed, their women turned the scale in their favor. They made their veils into flags, and marched in battle array. The enemy mistook them for reinforcements and abandoned the field. Thus an impending defeat was turned into a victory.

Basra and Kufa: town-planning

In Mesopotamia the Muslims did not base their power on old and effete Persian cities, but built new outposts for themselves. The first they built was Basra at the head of the Persian Gulf, in the 17th year of the Hijra. And what a great city it became! Not great in war and conquest, not great in trade and commerce, but great in learning and culture in its best day, - alas! also great in its spirit of faction and degeneracy in the days of its decline! But its situation and climate were not at all suited to the Arab character. It was low and moist, damp and enervating. In the same year the Arabs built another city not far off from the Gulf and yet well suited to be a port of the desert, as Kerbela became afterwards. This was the city of Kufa, built in the same year as Basra, but in a more bracing climate. It was the first experiment in town-planning in Islam. In the centre was a square for the principal mosque. That square was adorned with shady avenues. Another square was set apart for the trafficking of the market. The streets were all laid out intersecting and their width was fixed. The main thoroughfares for such traffic as they had (we must not imagine the sort of traffic we see in Charing Cross) were made 60 feet wide; the cross streets were 30 feet wide; and even the little lanes for pedestrians were regulated to a width of 10.5 feet. Kufa became a centre of light and learning. The Khalifa Hazrat Ali lived and died there.

Rivalry and poison of Damascus

But its rival, the city of Damascus, fattened on luxury and Byzantine magnificence. Its tinsel glory sapped the foundations of loyalty and the soldierly virtues. Its poison spread through the Muslim world. Governors wanted to be kings. Pomp and selfishness, ease and idleness and dissipation grew as a canker; wines and spirituous liquors, scepticism, cynicism and social vices became so rampant that the protests of the men of God were drowned in mockery. Mecca, which was to have been a symbolical spiritual center, was neglected or dishonored. Damascus and Syria became centers of a worldliness and arrogance, which cut at the basic roots of Islam.

Husain the Righteous refused to bow to worldliness and power

We have brought the story down to the 60th year of the Hijra. Yazid assumed the power at Damascus. He cared nothing for the most sacred ideals of the people. He was not even interested in the ordinary business affairs of administration. His passion was hunting, and he sought power for self-gratification. The discipline and self-abnegation, the strong faith and earnest endeavour, the freedom and sense of social equality, which had been the motive forces of Islam, were divorced from power. The throne at Damascus had become a worldly throne based on the most selfish ideas of personal and family aggrandizement, instead of a spiritual office, with a sense of God-given responsibility. The decay of morals spread among the people. There was one man who could stem the tide. That was Imam Husain. He, the grandson of the Prophet, could speak without fear, for fear was foreign to his nature. But his blameless and irreproachable life was in itself a reproach to those who had other standards. They sought to silence him, but he could not be silenced. They sought to bribe him, but he could not be bribed. They sought to waylay him and get him into their Power. What is more, they wanted him to recognize the tyranny and expressly to support it. For they knew that the conscience of the people might awaken at any time, and sweep them away unless the holy man supported their cause. The holy man was prepared to die rather than surrender the principles for which he stood.

Driven from city to city

Medina was the center of Husain's teaching. They made Medina impossible for him. He left Medina and went to Mecca, hoping that he would be left alone. But he was not left alone. The Syrian forces invaded Mecca. The invasion was repelled, not by Husain but by other people. For Husain, though the bravest of the brave, had no army and no worldly weapons. His existence itself was an offence in the eyes of his enemies. His life was in danger, and the lives of all those nearest and dearest to him. He had friends everywhere, but they were afraid to speak out. They were not as brave as he was. But in distant Kufa, a party grew up which said: "We are disgusted with these events, and we must have Imam Husain to take asylum with us." So they sent and invited the Imam to leave Mecca, come to them, live in their midst, and be their honored teacher and guide. His father's memory was held in reverence in Kufa. The

Governor of Kufa was friendly, and the people eager to welcome him. But alas, Kufa had neither strength, nor courage, nor constancy. Kufa, geographically only 40 miles from Kerbela, was the occasion of the tragedy of Kerbela. And now Kufa is nearly gone, and Kerbela remains as the lasting memorial of the martyrdom.

Invitation from Kufa

When the Kufa invitation reached the Imam, he pondered over it, weighed its possibilities, and consulted his friends. He sent over his cousin Muslim to study the situation on the spot and report to him. The report was favorable, and he decided to go. He had a strong presentiment of danger. Many of his friends in Mecca advised him against it. But could he abandon his mission when Kufa was calling for it? Was he the man to be deterred, because his enemies were laying their plots for him, at Damascus and at Kufa? At least, it was suggested, he might leave his family behind. But his family and his immediate dependants would not hear of it. It was a united family, pre-eminent in the purity of its life and in its domestic virtues and domestic affections. If there was danger for its head, they would share it. The Imam was not going on a mere ceremonial visit. There was responsible work to do, and they must be by his side, to support him in spite of all its perils and consequences. Shallow critics scent political ambition in the Imam's act. But would a man with political ambitions march without an army against what might be called the enemy country, scheming to get him into its power, and prepared to use all their resources, military, political and financial, against him?

Journey through the desert

Imam Husain left Mecca for Kufa with all his family including his little children. Later news from Kufa itself was disconcerting. The friendly governor had been displaced by one prepared more ruthlessly to carry out Yazid's plans. If Husain was to go there at all, he must go there quickly, or his friends themselves would be in danger. On the other hand, Mecca itself was no less dangerous to him and his family. It was the month of September by the solar calendar, and no one would take a long desert journey in that heat, except under a sense of duty. By the lunar calendar it was the month of pilgrimage at Mecca. But he did not stop for the pilgrimage. He pushed on, with his family and dependants, in all numbering about 90 or 100 people, men, women and children. They must have gone by forced marches through the desert. They covered the 900 miles of the desert in little over three weeks. When they came within a few miles of Kufa, at the edge of the desert, they met people from Kufa. It was then that they heard of the terrible murder of Husain's cousin Muslim, who had been sent on in advance. A poet that came by dissuaded the Imam from going further. "For," he said epigrammatically, "the heart of the city is with thee but its sword is with thine enemies, and the issue is with God." What was to be done? They were three weeks' journey from the city they had left. In the city to which they were going their own messenger had been foully murdered as well as his children. They did not

know what the actual situation was then in Kufa. But they were determined not to desert their friends.

Call to Surrender or Die

Presently messengers came from Kufa, and Imam Husain was asked to surrender. Imam Husain offered to take one of three alternatives. He wanted no political power and no revenge. He said "I came to defend my own people. If I am too late, give me the choice of three alternatives: either to return to Mecca; or to face Yazid himself at Damascus; or if my very presence is distasteful to him and you, I do not wish to cause more divisions among the Muslims. Let me at least go to a distant frontier, where, if fighting must be done, I will fight against the enemies of Islam." Every one of these alternatives was refused. What they wanted was to destroy his life, or better still, to get him to surrender, to surrender to the very forces against which he was protesting, to declare his adherence to those who were defying the law of God and man, and to tolerate all the abuses which were bringing the name of Islam into disgrace. Of course he did not surrender. But what was he to do? He had no army. He had reasons to suppose that many of his friends from distant parts would rally round him, and come and defend him with their swords and bodies. But time was necessary, and he was not going to gain time by feigned compliance. He turned a little round to the left, the way that would have led him to Yazid himself, at Damascus. He camped in the plain of Kerbela.

Water cut off; Inflexible will, Devotion and Chivalry

For ten days messages passed backwards and forwards between Kerbela and Kufa. Kufa wanted surrender and recognition. That was the one thing the Imam could not consent to. Every other alternative was refused by Kufa, under the instructions from Damascus. Those fateful ten days were the first ten days of the month of Muharram, of the year 61 of the Hijra. The final crisis was on the 10th day, the Ashura day, which we are commemorating. During the first seven days various kinds of pressure were brought to bear on the Imam, but his will was inflexible. It was not a question of a fight, for there were but 70 men against 4,000. The little band was surrounded and insulted, but they held together so firmly that they could not be harmed. On the 8th day the water supply was cut off. The Euphrates and its abundant streams were within sight, but the way was barred. Prodigies of valour were performed in getting water. Challenges were made for single combat according to Arab custom. And the enemies were half-hearted, while the Imam's men fought in contempt of death, and always accounted for more men than they lost. On the evening of the 9th day, the little son of the Imam was ill. He had fever and was dying of thirst. They tried to get a drop of water. But that was refused point blank and so they made the resolve that they would, rather than surrender, die to the last man in the cause for which they had come. Imam Husain offered to send away his people. He said, "They are after my person; my family and my people can go back." But everyone refused to go. They said

they would stand by him to the last, and they did. They were not cowards; they were soldiers born and bred; and they fought as heroes, with devotion and with chivalry.

The Final Agony; placid face of the man of God

On the day of Ashura, the 10th day, Imam Husain's own person was surrounded by his enemies. He was brave to the last. He was cruelly mutilated. His sacred head was cut off while in the act of prayer. A mad orgy of triumph was celebrated over his body. In this crisis we have details of what took place hour by hour. He had 45 wounds from the enemies' swords and javelins, and 35 arrows pierced his body. His left arm was cut off, and a javelin pierced through his breast. After all that agony, when his head was lifted up on a spear, his face was the placid face of a man of God. All the men of that gallant band were exterminated and their bodies trampled under foot by the horses. The only male survivor was a child, Husain's son Ali, surnamed Zain-ul-'Abidin - "The Glory of the Devout." He lived in retirement, studying, interpreting, and teaching his father's high spiritual principles for the rest of his life.

Heroism of the Women

There were women: for example, Zainab the sister of the Imam, Sakina his little daughter, and Shahr-i-Banu, his wife, at Kerbela. A great deal of poetic literature has sprung up in Muslim languages, describing the touching scenes in which they figure. Even in their grief and their tears they are heroic. They lament the tragedy in simple, loving, human terms. But they are also conscious of the noble dignity of their nearness to a life of truth reaching its goal in the precious crown of martyrdom. One of the best-known poets of this kind is the Urdu poet Anis, who lived in Lucknow, and died in 1874.

Lesson of the Tragedy

That briefly is the story. What is the lesson? There is of course the physical suffering in martyrdom, and all sorrow and suffering claim our sympathy, ---- the dearest, purest, most out flowing sympathy that we can give. But there is a greater suffering than physical suffering. That is when a valiant soul seems to stand against the world; when the noblest motives are reviled and mocked; when truth seems to suffer an eclipse. It may even seem that the martyr has but to say a word of compliance, do a little deed of non-resistance; and much sorrow and suffering would be saved; and the insidious whisper comes: "Truth after all can never die." That is perfectly true. Abstract truth can never die. It is independent of man's cognition. But the whole battle is for man's keeping hold of truth and righteousness. And that can only be done by the highest examples of man's conduct - spiritual striving and suffering enduring firmness of faith and purpose, patience and courage where ordinary mortals would give in or be cowed down, the sacrifice of ordinary motives to supreme truth in scorn of consequence. The martyr bears witness, and the witness redeems what would otherwise be called failure. It so happened with Husain. For all were touched by the

story of his martyrdom, and it gave the deathblow to the politics of Damascus and all it stood for. And Muharram has still the power to unite the different schools of thought in Islam, and make a powerful appeal to non-Muslims also.

Explorers of Spiritual Territory

That, to my mind, is the supreme significance of martyrdom. All human history shows that the human spirit strives in many directions, deriving strength and sustenance from many sources. Our bodies, our physical powers, have developed or evolved from earlier forms, after many struggles and defeats. Our intellect has had its martyrs, and our great explorers have often gone forth with the martyrs' spirit. All honor to them. But the highest honor must still lie with the great explorers of spiritual territory, those who faced fearful odds and refused to surrender to evil. Rather than allow a stigma to attach to sacred things, they paid with their own lives the penalty of resistance. The first kind of resistance offered by the Imam was when he went from city to city, hunted about from place to place, but making no compromise with evil. Then was offered the choice of an effectual but dangerous attempt at clearing the house of God, or living at ease for himself by tacit abandonment of his striving friends. He chose the path of danger with duty and honor, and never swerved from it giving up his life freely and bravely. His story purifies our emotions. We can best honor his memory by allowing it to teach us courage and constancy.